

AN ANALYSIS OF EFL STUDENTS' DIFFICULTIES IN CATEGORIZING ENGLISH WORD CLASSES BASED ON THEIR MENTAL LEXICON

Bq. Qotrunnada Keisha Ayu¹, Jumadil², Edi Firman³

Mandalika University Of Education

¹bqtrnnadaa@gmail.com , ² jumadil.adilo@yahoo.co.id ,

³ edifirman@undikma.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze EFL students' difficulties in categorizing English word classes based on their mental lexicon at SMKN 5 Mataram. A qualitative descriptive research design was employed involving fifteen tenth-grade students selected through purposive sampling. Data were collected using a Word Categorization Test and semi-structured interviews. The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, including data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings revealed that students experienced difficulties in categorizing abstract nouns, morphologically complex words, and words with multiple grammatical functions. The interview results indicated that these difficulties were influenced by reliance on semantic meaning, limited morphological awareness, difficulties in retrieving grammatical information, and weak lexical connections within the students' mental lexicon. Although most students correctly categorized familiar words, they encountered problems when processing unfamiliar or context-dependent vocabulary. The study concludes that the organization of the mental lexicon plays a significant role in students' ability to categorize English word classes accurately. Therefore, English vocabulary instruction should emphasize not only word meanings but also morphological knowledge, grammatical functions, and contextual usage to strengthen students' lexical organization and improve language learning outcomes.

Keywords: *EFL students, mental lexicon, word classes, word categorization, qualitative descriptive research.*

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis kesulitan siswa EFL dalam mengategorikan kelas kata bahasa Inggris berdasarkan *mental lexicon* mereka di SMKN 5 Mataram. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian deskriptif kualitatif dengan melibatkan lima belas siswa kelas X yang dipilih melalui teknik *purposive sampling*. Data dikumpulkan menggunakan Word Categorization Test dan wawancara semi-terstruktur. Data dianalisis menggunakan model analisis interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña yang meliputi reduksi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan dan verifikasi kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa siswa mengalami kesulitan dalam mengategorikan nomina abstrak, kata yang memiliki struktur morfologis kompleks, serta kata yang memiliki lebih dari satu fungsi gramatikal. Hasil wawancara menunjukkan bahwa kesulitan tersebut dipengaruhi oleh kecenderungan siswa mengandalkan makna kata, rendahnya kesadaran morfologis, kesulitan dalam mengambil informasi gramatikal dari memori, serta lemahnya hubungan leksikal dalam *mental lexicon*. Meskipun sebagian besar siswa mampu mengategorikan kata-kata yang familiar dengan benar, mereka masih mengalami kesulitan ketika mengidentifikasi kosakata yang kurang dikenal atau

bergantung pada konteks. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa organisasi *mental lexicon* berperan penting dalam kemampuan siswa mengategorikan kelas kata bahasa Inggris secara akurat. Oleh karena itu, pembelajaran kosakata bahasa Inggris perlu menekankan tidak hanya makna kata, tetapi juga pengetahuan morfologis, fungsi gramatikal, dan penggunaan kata dalam konteks.

Kata Kunci: siswa EFL, *mental lexicon*, kelas kata, kategorisasi kata, penelitian deskriptif kualitatif.

A. Pendahuluan

Language is an essential tool for human communication because it allows people to express ideas, exchange information, and interact with others. In learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), vocabulary plays an important role because it supports learners' ability to understand and produce meaningful communication. Vocabulary knowledge does not only involve memorizing the meaning of words but also requires learners to understand the form, function, and usage of words in different contexts.

For EFL learners, vocabulary learning can become a challenging process because English is rarely used as the main language of communication in daily life. Limited exposure to English may affect students' ability to recognize, remember, and use vocabulary accurately. Recent research shows that many EFL learners still experience difficulties in developing

vocabulary knowledge, especially when they have to recognize word forms and apply words based on their functions in sentences.

One important aspect of vocabulary knowledge is the ability to categorize words based on their grammatical functions, known as word classes or parts of speech. English word classes include nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Nouns are used to identify people, places, objects, or concepts; verbs express actions or states; adjectives describe nouns; and adverbs provide additional information about actions or descriptions. Understanding word classes is important because each category has different functions that influence sentence structure and meaning.

However, many EFL students experience difficulties in identifying and classifying English words into appropriate word classes. Students may understand the meaning of a word but fail to recognize its

grammatical function when the word appears in different contexts. For instance, the word “change” can function as a noun in “The change is important” and as a verb in “Students change their habits.” This difficulty indicates that word categorization requires deeper lexical knowledge rather than simple vocabulary memorization.

Research conducted by Hustiana (2023) found that students faced several problems in learning parts of speech, including lack of vocabulary mastery, insufficient understanding of word categories, and difficulties differentiating parts of speech. The study also showed that students needed to consider word characteristics, word position, and meaning when identifying word classes (Hustiana, 2023: 145–146).

Similarly, Asdar, Hustiana, and Ahyadi (2023) investigated EFL students’ familiarity with part of speech classification. Their findings revealed that students still experienced difficulties in identifying several word categories, particularly when they were required to classify words independently. The study emphasized that familiarity with word classes influences students’ ability to

analyze and use English vocabulary accurately (Asdar et al., 2023: 793–801).

These difficulties can be related to how lexical information is organized in learners’ minds. The mental lexicon refers to the internal system where vocabulary knowledge is stored, connected, and accessed during language processing. When learners have weak connections between words, meanings, and grammatical information, they may experience problems retrieving and categorizing vocabulary correctly. Therefore, examining students’ difficulties through the perspective of the mental lexicon can provide a deeper understanding of why learners make errors in word classification.

Although previous studies have discussed students’ difficulties in learning parts of speech, most studies focus on students’ understanding of grammar or vocabulary mastery. Limited research has explored how the organization of students’ mental lexicon influences their ability to categorize English word classes, especially among vocational high school students in Indonesia. This gap indicates the need for further investigation into the relationship

between lexical organization and word classification difficulties.

At SMKN 5 Mataram, tenth-grade students are expected to develop English skills that support their academic and vocational needs. As vocational students, they encounter various English texts and instructions that require accurate vocabulary understanding. Difficulties in recognizing word classes may affect their ability to comprehend and produce English sentences effectively. Therefore, this study aims to analyze EFL students' difficulties in categorizing English word classes based on their mental lexicon at SMKN 5 Mataram.

B. Metode Penelitian

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate EFL students' difficulties in categorizing English word classes based on their mental lexicon. The study was conducted at SMKN 5 Mataram during the 2026/2027 academic year. The participants were tenth-grade students selected through purposive sampling because they had learned basic English word classes but still experienced categorization difficulties.

Data were collected using two instruments: a Word Categorization Test and semi-structured interviews. The test was administered to identify students' errors in classifying nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, while interviews were conducted with selected students to explore the factors underlying their difficulties, including vocabulary limitations, grammatical knowledge, and first-language interference.

The data were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. This analysis enabled the researcher to identify patterns of categorization errors and explain how students' mental lexicon influenced their understanding of English word classes.

C. Hasil Penelitian dan Pembahasan

This chapter presents the findings of the study conducted at SMKN 5 Mataram. The findings were obtained through two research instruments: the Word Categorization Test and Semi-Structured Interviews. The Word Categorization Test was administered to fifteen tenth-grade

EFL students to identify their difficulties in categorizing English word classes based on their mental lexicon. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four selected participants who demonstrated the highest number of categorization errors in order to explore the cognitive factors underlying their difficulties. The findings are presented according to the two research questions formulated in Chapter I.

1. Description of the Research Participants

The participants of this study consisted of fifteen tenth-grade students of SMKN 5 Mataram. They were selected purposively because they had learned English word classes in their English classes. All participants completed the Word Categorization Test, while four students who demonstrated the highest number of categorization errors were selected for semi-structured interviews. To maintain confidentiality, all participants are identified using participant codes (P1–P15).

Participant	Gander	Instrument
P1	Female	Test
P2	Female	Test
P3	Male	Test
P4	Female	Test

P5	Female	Test
P6	Male	Test
P7	Female	Test
P8	Male	Test
P9	Female	Test
P10	Female	Test
P11	Male	Test
P12	Female	Test + Interview
P13	Male	Test + Interview
P14	Male	Test + Interview
P15	Female	Test + Interview

Table 4.1 Participants of the study

The interview participants (P12–P15) were selected because they produced the greatest number of incorrect responses in both Part A (Word Categorization) and Part B (Context Sentence). Their responses provided valuable insights into how their mental lexicon influenced their ability to categorize English word classes.

2. Findings of the Word Categorization Test

The Word Categorization Test was administered to fifteen tenth-grade students of SMKN 5 Mataram to identify their difficulties in categorizing English word classes based on their mental lexicon. The test consisted of two sections. Part A required the students to classify English words into

four word classes (noun, verb, adjective, and adverb), while Part B required them to identify the word classes of underlined words in contextual sentences. The results of both sections were analyzed to identify the types of errors made by the participants.

Table 4.2 presents the overall performance of the fifteen participants in the Word Categorization Test.

Participant	Part A	Part B	Total Errors
P1	1	1	2
P2	2	1	3
P3	1	1	2
P4	1	0	1
P5	2	1	3
P6	1	1	2
P7	1	2	3
P8	0	1	1
P9	2	1	3
P10	1	1	2
P11	1	2	3
P12	5	4	9
P13	6	4	10
P14	7	3	10
P15	8	3	11

Table 4.2 Students' Result in the Word Categorization Test

Based on Table 4.2, eleven participants (P1–P11) demonstrated relatively good performance in both sections of the test. Most of them made only one to three errors, indicating that they were generally able to recognize common English word classes. However, they still experienced difficulties when categorizing unfamiliar vocabulary,

abstract nouns, or words with multiple grammatical functions.

In contrast, four participants (P12–P15) produced considerably more errors than the other participants. Their errors appeared consistently in both Part A and Part B, suggesting that they experienced greater difficulties in accessing and organizing lexical information. Therefore, these four participants were selected for semi-structured interviews to explore the cognitive processes underlying their responses.

A closer examination of the students' answers revealed that the majority of incorrect responses occurred when the participants categorized abstract nouns such as development, equipment, creation, and achievement. Many students identified these words as verbs because they associated them with their root forms (develop, equip, create, and achieve) rather than recognizing the noun-forming suffixes. This finding indicates limited morphological awareness in organizing lexical information.

In addition, several participants experienced difficulties with words that have multiple grammatical functions, such as plant, record, and produce.

Most students assumed that each English word belonged to only one word class. Consequently, they failed to recognize that these words could function as either nouns or verbs depending on the context. This pattern reflects an incomplete lexical network within the students' mental lexicon.

Furthermore, familiar and concrete words such as table, run, beautiful, and quickly were categorized correctly by almost all participants. These words were retrieved more easily because they frequently appeared in classroom instruction and daily communication. This suggests that frequent exposure strengthened the organization of these lexical items in the students' mental lexicon.

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Overall, the findings of the Word Categorization Test indicate that the students' difficulties were not merely related to vocabulary size but also to the organization of lexical knowledge. The participants tended to rely on word meaning rather than grammatical information, experienced limited awareness of morphological patterns, and encountered problems in retrieving lexical information when categorizing English word classes. These findings provide initial evidence that the organization of students' mental lexicon influences their ability to categorize English word classes accurately.

Findings of the Semi-Structured Interview

To gain a deeper understanding of the students' difficulties in

categorizing English word classes, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants (P12, P13, P14, and P15). These participants were selected because they produced the highest number of errors in the Word Categorization Test. The interview findings were analyzed thematically to identify how the students' mental lexicon influenced their categorization of English word classes.

Semantic-Based Retrieval

The first theme emerged from Participant 12 (P12). The participant reported relying primarily on word meaning when determining word classes. Before deciding whether a word was a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb, the participant first translated the word into Indonesian. As the participant stated:

"I remembered the meaning first. I knew that equipment means peralatan and development means perkembangan, but I did not immediately know that they were nouns."

This response indicates that the participant's lexical access was meaning-oriented rather than grammar-oriented. Instead of recognizing morphological markers or

grammatical functions, the participant depended on semantic knowledge to categorize words. Consequently, unfamiliar or abstract words often caused uncertainty.

The participant also admitted that familiar words such as table, run, and beautiful were easier to categorize because they were frequently encountered in English lessons. However, words such as development and succeed created confusion despite the participant knowing their meanings. These findings suggest that semantic information was more strongly represented in the participant's mental lexicon than grammatical information....

Limited Morphological Awareness

The second theme was identified from Participant 13 (P13). The participant experienced difficulty recognizing morphological patterns, particularly noun-forming suffixes such as -ment and -tion.

The participant explained:

"I guessed the answer because I did not know that the suffix -ment usually indicates a noun."

This statement demonstrates that the participant had limited

awareness of English word formation. Rather than analyzing the structure of the word, the participant relied on familiarity or guessing. Similar confusion also appeared when categorizing influenced the organization of lexical information in the participant's mental lexicon.

Lexical Retrieval Difficulty

The third theme emerged from Participant 14 (P14). The participant reported knowing the meanings of several words but experiencing difficulty recalling their grammatical categories during the test.

As stated by the participant:

"I knew the meaning of produce, but I forgot whether it was a verb or a noun."

This response suggests that lexical information was stored in the participant's mental lexicon but could not be accessed efficiently during the categorization task. The participant frequently translated words into Indonesian before attempting to identify their grammatical categories, yet still expressed uncertainty after recalling the meanings.

The findings indicate that retrieving grammatical information required greater cognitive effort than retrieving semantic information.

Weak Lexical Network

The final theme was identified from Participant 15 (P15). The participant experienced confusion when encountering words that shared similar forms or possessed multiple grammatical functions.

The participant stated:

"I thought achievement was a verb because it looked similar to achieve."

The participant also believed that words such as plant and record belonged to only one grammatical category and was unaware that these words could function as both nouns and verbs depending on context.

These responses suggest that the participant's lexical network had not yet developed strong connections among semantic, morphological, and grammatical information. As a result, words with similar forms or multiple functions were often categorized incorrectly..

Overall, the interview findings revealed that the four participants experienced different types of difficulties in categorizing English word classes. Although each participant demonstrated a distinct pattern of difficulty, all of them indicated that their mental lexicon had

not fully integrated semantic, morphological, and grammatical information. Consequently, they tended to rely on word meaning, familiarity, or guessing rather than systematically analyzing grammatical categories.

These findings support the results of the Word Categorization Test and demonstrate that the organization of students' mental lexicon plays a significant role in their ability to categorize English word classes accurately. The interview data therefore provide a deeper explanation of the difficulties identified in the test and directly answer the second research question regarding the influence of mental lexicon on students' categorization performance.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed that the students experienced various difficulties in categorizing English word classes. These difficulties were identified through the Word Categorization Test and further explored through semi-structured interviews. The findings indicate that the students' difficulties were not solely caused by limited vocabulary knowledge but were also influenced by the way lexical

information was organized and retrieved from their mental lexicon.

The results of the Word Categorization Test showed that most participants were able to categorize familiar and frequently encountered words, such as table, run, beautiful, and quickly, with little difficulty. These words are commonly used in classroom activities and everyday communication, making them easier to recognize and retrieve from memory. In contrast, many participants experienced difficulties when categorizing abstract nouns and morphologically complex words, such as development, equipment, creation, and achievement. These words required the participants not only to understand their meanings but also to recognize their grammatical functions and morphological structures. Similar difficulties were also found in words with multiple grammatical functions, such as record, plant, and produce, which were frequently categorized into only one word class.

The interview findings provided a deeper explanation of these difficulties. The participants demonstrated different patterns of lexical processing when categorizing English word classes. Some

participants relied primarily on semantic knowledge by translating English words into Indonesian before determining their grammatical categories. Others experienced difficulty recognizing morphological patterns, particularly noun-forming suffixes such as -ment and -tion. Several participants were able to remember the meanings of the words but were unable to retrieve grammatical information during the categorization task. Another participant showed confusion when encountering words with similar forms or multiple grammatical functions, indicating that the lexical connections within the mental lexicon had not yet been fully developed.

These findings suggest that the organization of the students' mental lexicon played a significant role in their ability to categorize English word classes. Although most participants understood the meanings of many English words, semantic knowledge alone was insufficient for accurate grammatical categorization. The findings indicate that successful categorization requires the integration of semantic, morphological, and grammatical information within the mental lexicon. When these

components are not strongly connected, students tend to depend on guessing, familiarity, or translation rather than linguistic analysis.

The findings of this study support the theory proposed by Jiang (2023), who explains that vocabulary knowledge depends on the effective organization of semantic, phonological, morphological, and syntactic information in the mental lexicon. Learners with well-organized lexical representations are able to retrieve grammatical information more efficiently, whereas those with weaker lexical organization often experience hesitation and categorization errors. The present study demonstrates a similar pattern, as the participants frequently knew the meanings of words but were unable to identify their grammatical categories accurately.

The findings are also consistent with Agustín Llach (2023), who emphasizes that vocabulary acquisition involves more than memorizing word meanings. Learners are expected to understand morphological patterns, grammatical functions, and contextual word usage to achieve effective lexical processing. In the present study, many participants categorized derived

words based on their base forms rather than recognizing their morphological structures, indicating limited awareness of English word formation.

Furthermore, the findings support the previous study conducted by Suadiyatno et al. (2024), which reported that Indonesian EFL learners are strongly influenced by their first language when processing English vocabulary. Similar to the participants in the present study, many students first translated English words into Indonesian before attempting to determine their grammatical categories. While this strategy helped them access semantic information, it often led to incorrect categorization because Indonesian does not mark word classes morphologically as consistently as English.

Overall, this study demonstrates that the students' difficulties in categorizing English word classes were closely related to the organization of their mental lexicon. The participants' reliance on semantic meaning, limited morphological awareness, difficulties in retrieving grammatical information, and weak lexical connections contributed to their categorization errors. These findings

indicate that English vocabulary instruction should not focus solely on teaching word meanings but should also emphasize morphological knowledge, grammatical functions, and contextual usage. By strengthening the organization of lexical knowledge, students may develop a more effective mental lexicon and improve their ability to categorize English word classes accurately. Findings of the Semi-Structured Interview

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D. Kesimpulan

This study aimed to analyze the difficulties experienced by EFL students in categorizing English word classes based on their mental lexicon. The study involved fifteen tenth-grade students of SMKN 5 Mataram. Data were collected through a Word Categorization Test and semi-structured interviews with four selected participants. Based on the findings and discussion presented in the previous chapter, several conclusions can be drawn.

First, the findings revealed that the students experienced various difficulties in categorizing English word classes. Although most participants were able to categorize familiar words correctly, they encountered difficulties when dealing with abstract nouns, morphologically complex words, and words with multiple grammatical functions. The participants frequently misclassified words such as development, equipment, creation, achievement, record, plant, and produce. These findings indicate that students' difficulties were not only related to vocabulary knowledge but also to their understanding of grammatical categories and word formation.

Second, the study found that the students' mental lexicon significantly influenced their ability to categorize English word classes. The interview findings showed that the participants used different lexical processing strategies. Some participants relied mainly on semantic meaning by translating English words into Indonesian before determining their grammatical categories. Others demonstrated limited awareness of English morphological patterns, experienced difficulties in retrieving grammatical information, or showed weak lexical connections when processing words with similar forms or multiple grammatical functions. These patterns suggest that semantic, morphological, and grammatical information had not yet been fully integrated within the participants' mental lexicon.

Overall, this study concludes that the organization of the mental lexicon plays an important role in students' ability to categorize English word classes accurately. A well-organized mental lexicon enables learners to retrieve lexical and grammatical information efficiently, whereas incomplete lexical organization may lead to categorization errors.

Therefore, vocabulary instruction should focus not only on word meanings but also on morphological patterns, grammatical functions, and contextual usage to strengthen students' lexical organization and improve their language competence..

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